

Community Values Communication Toolkit

Section D: Applying Community Values to Worker Justice

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Worker Justice Talking Points and Messaging Examples

When we talk about Community Values and our economy and labor market, we need to emphasize the importance of everyone benefiting from the wealth we all create. Creating shared wealth requires that we treat every worker fairly and with dignity. We also need to manage economic growth and development in ways that sustain rather than destroy our community and environment. When economic downturns happen, our community values mean that we minimize harm and pull together so that everyone can provide for their families. These priorities reflect what each of us wants for ourselves, and for our neighbors.

When we talk about economic inequality though, it becomes clear that there are real divisions. Currently, some benefit disproportionately and unfairly from wealth that we all help to produce. We need to underscore that our shared economy is better and stronger when we all benefit. But we also need to take care not to vilify people - even those who have benefited from the current “go it alone” economic system. The real problem today is not the business owner or rich person, but the values system that prioritizes individual wealth and accumulation over the economic well-being of the entire community.

Another challenge we may face when using Community Values to talk about our economy is the belief that an economic system that reflects our values would undermine economic growth. However, if we work to ensure our prosperity is shared, our environment is protected, and a meaningful safety net exists for those who fall upon hard times, we can create an economy that makes room for entrepreneurship, growth and equity.

Using the Value, Problem, Solution, Action Model

- Value:** We know that the economic well-being of our community depends on all of us being able to make ends meet.
- Problem:** But the structure of our economy and our economic institutions has resulted in more families struggling economically while inequality rises, leaving wealth concentrated among a select few.
- Solution:** We need policies that support both growth and equity, create jobs that pay a fair and livable wage, and protect the rights of workers.
- Action:** Ask the candidates what they will do to ensure that our economy works to benefit all of us, not just a few.

Messaging Examples

- Embracing Community Values means that we share a basic concern about one another, and accept that the well being of each one of us, and each of our families ultimately depends on the well being of all of us. As a wealthy nation, we have a shared responsibility to use our collective wealth to establish and support programs that help people rise out of poverty.
- The fates of all workers are connected. When some employers pay workers below the minimum wage or don't pay them for working overtime, these practices quickly spread and other employers try to profit by following these bad examples. This type of race to the bottom ultimately leaves workers competing with each other over lower wages and

fewer benefits. Instead of emphasizing cost-savings and competition, we need to encourage ethical and compassionate business practices that are accountable to the community, and cooperation among workers.

- We, as a community, must demand that all workers are fairly paid for the hard work they do. This doesn't just make sense from the perspective of workers, but it's good for society as a whole. Providing workers with a living wage makes it possible for them to better care for their families, save for the future, contribute to the community and build a stronger America.
- In the last century, factory owners recognized that they needed to pay their employees a fair wage. Then workers could buy the goods they produced with their own hands. Higher wages were good for business and good for workers. The same thing is true today. In our interconnected society, when workers are fairly compensated, they buy more goods and services for their families, and their purchasing power bolsters the economy..
- History shows us that our government has an important role to play in making sure that everyone is treated fairly. Cut currently, our government doesn't adequately enforce laws that protect the health, safety, and economic stability of workers. We need to pursue policies of connection that will make sure that workers are not subjected to unethical business practices. When employers do violate those community standards, the community needs to be able to call on the government to hold employers accountable for the harm they've done to their employees and the entire community.
- As a society that values looking out for each other, we need to make sure that all worker standards are enforced. Currently, too many practices that endanger the health, safety and economic stability of workers slip between the enforcement cracks. We need to show that we are serious about protecting workers' safety and about ensuring that all workplaces are run in a safe and fair manner.
- Workers know that they are stronger when they work together to take on unfair practices by employers and advance their collective interests. But the law doesn't recognize or support this fact because it forces workers to individually file complaints against employers. When workers are forced to comply with this go it alone mentality, they open themselves up to threats and retaliation. The law should recognize the real connections among workers by allowing organizations, organized workers and worker centers to file complaints on behalf of groups of workers.
- Laws governing worker complaints need to reflect our community values better. Currently, the law forces workers to file complaints as individuals, opening each worker up to threats and retaliation. Instead, the law should recognize the community formed by people who work together by allowing organizations, unions and worker centers to file complaints on behalf of groups of workers. Workers are stronger when they come together, and strong workers lead to strong communities.
- A business is just another part of our community. But all too often, most of the people in the community have little or no voice or power in the business decisions that affect the community. We need business interests to recognize that they are part of us and have a responsibility to respect the needs of the community. That means paying workers a fair wage, being good stewards of the environment that we all share, and giving back to the community.

Applying Community Values to an Economy Op-Ed

Op-eds are your chance to communicate directly to policy makers, your constituents, and other target audiences. Since you have a higher degree of message control than in other pieces, it's important to be mindful of your framing themes and language. While it can be tempting to launch directly into a litany of complaints in an opinion piece, it is a prime place to use the Value, Problem, Solution, Action model.

Practically speaking, op-eds usually run no more than 500-700 words. Many outlets include op-ed guidelines and instructions for submission on their website. In pitching an op-ed, you need to make the case for why the topic is of interest now, why you are the person to address it, and why your angle will interest readers.

This op-ed lays out a new term for describing contrasting ways of thinking about economics, and it connects community values to economic policy.

Rejecting the YOYOs by Jared Bernstein

The way the polls tell the story, American politics may be closing in on a tipping point. Even among traditional supporters, the Bush agenda is wearing thin. Sure, presidential approval ratings bounce around, but the depth and the persistence of Bush's negative trend suggest that this isn't just about the cost of a gallon of gas. A majority of the electorate may well be ready for a change.

The author starts with a news hook – recent polls – to indicate why the op-ed is timely.

If so, the result would be a shift in power from conservatives to Democrats in the midterm elections. Simply changing the guard, however, won't ensure that we start to address the broadly-shared sense that somewhere along the way, we've gotten fundamentally off-track.

The author then introduces his values-based argument, explicitly outlining the debate as one between individualism and a collective approach.

It's time for the WITTs to take over from the YOYOs.

Come again?

American politics have always been a balancing act between protecting the rights and privileges of individuals, and working together to meet profound challenges. Yet in recent years the emphasis on individualism has been pushed to the point where it is hurting our nation’s standing in the world, endangering our future, and, paradoxically, making it harder for individuals to get a fair shot at the American dream. The message, sometimes implicit but often explicit, is, You’re on your own , or YOYO.

Using the term “you’re on your own” disparages the individualistic approach. By painting this as a battle of ideas, or of messages, the author avoids explicit attacks on the people promoting the argument. This is a useful, as well as a community values oriented approach.

Under YOYOism, whatever economic challenges we face as a nation—globalization, health care, inequality—the best solution is for people to fend for themselves. Its central goal is to shift economic risks from the government and corporations onto individuals and their families. You can see this beneath the surface of almost every recent conservative initiative: Social Security privatization, personal accounts for health care, attacks on labor market regulations, and the perpetual crusade to slash the government’s revenue through regressive tax cuts—“starving the beast”—and block the government from playing a useful role in our economic lives.

Using specific policy examples, the author defines the “you’re on your own” approach in recognizable terms. By using more than one example, he underscored that this approach is an ideology, not an idea about a specific policy. The trend applies to many issues, one of which is bound to strike a chord in individual readers.

While this fast-moving reassignment of economic risk would be bad news in any period, it’s particularly harmful today. The challenges we face are generating both greater inequalities and a higher degree of economic insecurity in our lives.

Even with unemployment low in historical terms, the earnings of most workers have failed to keep pace with inflation, much less with our impressive productivity growth. Productivity growth is up 15 percent over the current recovery and the profit share of national income is at a 39-year high, but the inflation-adjusted weekly earnings of the median, or typical, full-time worker are actually down by two percent.

Conservatives are in denial about these facts, continuing to cite GDP growth, etc., as if such top-line statistics will make workers feel better about their squeezed paychecks. And it's no surprise that they're stuck with an economic message that amounts to "it's all good." Under YOYO economics, there is no explanation for an economy that's doing fine except for the people in it.

Meanwhile, Democrats are generally following the adage, "when your opponent is beating himself up, sit down and watch."

"We're not them" could be a winning platform right now. But to stop there sacrifices a unique opportunity to introduce a new, optimistic agenda with the potential to reach an electorate that understandably seems stuck between apathy and cynicism.

Such sentiments grow right out of the YOYO narrative: in our competitive, global economy, the best your government can do is give you a tax cut, a private account, and get out of your way. After that, if you're not skilled enough to compete, well, "we feel your pain."

We need an alternative vision, one that supports individual freedom but also emphasizes that such freedom is best realized with a more collaborative approach to meeting the challenges we face. The message is simple: We're in this together, or WITT.

Here, the author offers a positive solution using the language of community values.

Where YOYO economics explains why we cannot shape our participation in the global economy to meet our own needs, or provide health coverage for the millions who lack that basic right, or raise the living standards of working families when the economy is growing, WITT policies target these challenges head on. These outcomes occur not through redistributionist Robin Hood schemes, but through creating an economic architecture that reconnects our strong, flexible economy to the living standards of all, not just to the residents of the penthouse. As the pie grows, all the bakers get bigger slices.

He explains how applying this new vision could look, emphasizing that our prosperity is something to share and grow. He doesn't rely on old competitive economic arguments, a frame with which we are all familiar, but rather discusses an economy with room for everyone.

Step one is to restore some fiscal sanity and basic competence at all levels in national government, a step we'll hopefully begin taking in November. Beyond that, there are actually a number of good, big ideas floating around to create precisely the architecture America needs.

There are doable plans for universal health coverage, boosting retirement savings, and for creating an ambitious partnership between business and government to seriously pursue energy independence. There are roadmaps for tapping the growth-enhancing benefits of globalization to replace the domestic labor demand it saps from our job market

By emphasizing that a community values approach is not only the right thing to do, but also workable and practical, the author reassures the audience.

Put it all together, and we create the potential to reconnect the well-being of working families to the growing economy.

The YOYOs chickens are coming home to roost, and many of us await with great hope the arrival of the much more optimistic, can-do, WITT agenda. The only question: who has the vision to lead the way?

A final challenge to the reader is implicit: challenge your candidates to embrace a community values approach rather than the old-fashioned "you're on your own" mentality.